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UNCLAS HANOI 002864

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SUBJECT: 13 Montagnards Return to Vietnam

Reftels: A) Hanoi 2485 and previous; B) Phnom Penh 1629 and previous

1. (SBU) UNHCR Vietnam Country Representative Vu Anh Son reported to us October 18 that the 13 Montagnards who had originally sought resettlement from Cambodia but ultimately decided to return to Vietnam -- with or without UNHCR's assistance -- had indeed returned to Vietnam. According to Son, the 13 decided to strike off on their own from Phnom Penh rather than wait for UNHCR and the GVN to reach an agreement on the modalities of their repatriation. The 13 Montagnards crossed into Vietnam on October 12 and UNHCR was currently unaware of their welfare and whereabouts, Son said.

2. (SBU) According to Thai Xuan Dung, Deputy Head of the External Consular Relations section of MFA's Department of Consular Affairs (the office in charge of this issue), the 13 had "returned home safely." Dung told us October 21 that, thanks to the assistance of local authorities, the 13 had been able to be reunited with their families. In a separate conversation, ConGen HCMC DPO raised the return of the 13 with an official in Ho Chi Minh City's External Relations Office. At the time, the official had no substantive response but noted that, if the 13 had crossed into Vietnam "illegally," they would be in "big trouble." Earlier, GVN officials had announced that Montagnards that chose to return voluntarily would not/not be punished.

3. (SBU) Comment: We will attempt to confirm MFA's assertion that the 13 have returned home safely, but this is often easier said than done. Our experience has been that getting any information at all from central government and provincial authorities on Central Highlands migration questions has been difficult. Previous inquiries related to this issue have been studiously ignored, we believe because the GVN considers the Central Highlands a matter of "national security." End Comment.

MARINE